

A Courtship bornofstars

Star Wars - All Media Types / Star Wars Prequel Trilogy Complete



A Courtship

bornofstars

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Summary

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Description:

Padmé survives and becomes an anonymous member of the Rebel High Command. Nobody seems to recognise the Senator thought dead in the uprising of the Empire.
Until they do.

1. A Courtship

“All I’m saying,” one of the Commanders leans over and Padmé moves back to accommodate him. “Is that this outpost is our best bet on actually getting our hands on this data.”

“Thank you, Commander Kodah.” Mon Mothma says smoothly, and internally Padmé winces at the steel hidden in her soothing tones. “But *all I’m saying*, as you put it, is that the loss of life would be too great. Even if we send in our best troops, it would still be an absolute bloodbath.”

She catches Padmé’s eyes meaningfully. *Message received*, she thinks with a mental sigh.

Padmé would like to think that when democracy had gone up in flames, that petty squabbles among politicians would have died alongside it.

Padmé clears her throat reluctantly before she addresses the fidgeting and agitated room.

“Senator Mothma’s right.” She says. “Going in without stealth will result in a slaughter. I know that we’re all anxious to get this data chip, but it’ll be a fruitless effort if we end up dead beforehand.”

There’s a murmur of agreement around the room. High Command, pilots, and ground staff alike have all crowded into the command centre to pore over a map of the inner core.

A defected Science Officer had come to them, claiming that the Empire had a plan of new base locations throughout the galaxy, stored in a research facility. If the Alliance could get their hands on the chip, they’d be able to bombard them at their weakest; half-built and isolated from other outposts.

“We just need the right team,” Commander Kohah insists in frustration. He’s still in his flightsuit, his helmet clutched under his arm as he attempts to stand still at parade-rest. “In and out, before we’re spotted.”

“Let’s be rational.” Mon Mothma says diplomatically. “Erraticism will set us on a course for failure. With the blockades on...”

Padmé feels her com-link vibrate in her pocket. The base they’re on, a moon in the outer-rim, is hot and humid. She leaves the relatively cool room, despite the sheer wall of body-heat, with an apologetic nod to command.

In the quiet of the hallway, Padmé opens her link.

“Yes?” She asks briskly. Not many have her frequency, and Bail isn’t due to send her a check-in regarding the twins for another two months. Most would prefer just to find her on base than send her a com.

“Who is this?” She asks, glancing back over her shoulder to the meeting she’s just stepped out of.

Mon would need her in there to back her rejection of the attack on the research outpost. Reconnaissance had shown it armed to the teeth, with numerous garrisons and even a TIE fighter squadron. The troops are too eager to fight, lay down their lives for a rumour some Imperial has bought them. For all they know, it's a trap. It certainly wouldn't be the first time.

Anakin had always been an underrated tactician. Overshadowed by Obi-Wan's endless patience, Anakin had been deemed reckless and brash. He seems to have honed his skill of warfare strategy. So far, the Rebel Alliance had had a hard time breaking through the Imperial line of defence. The pilots were all itching to get the Empire on the backfoot for once.

She holds her com-link closer, brows furrowed.

"... Shhhhhhhhhhhhh...."

The hiss of static makes her recoil. There's no words beneath the sound, completely blanketed by white noise.

"Who is this?" Padmé asks again, feeling a swell of fear in her stomach.

"Shhhhhhh.. " No. Not white noise. A whisper, breathless. She hears the staggering inhale, a gasp of feral excitement. The hairs on the back of her arms stand up. It sounds ghastly, almost not human. The primal part of her brain flares to life. *Danger, danger, danger.*

A surge of panic makes her almost drop the com-link in terror.

She severs the call with a shuddering gasp. For a few seconds, her heart pounds in her chest and she simply stares at the device in her hands, as though it were about to start hissing at her again.

Padmé takes a breath. Then laughs, a shaky chuckle.

Embarrassed, she notes that thankfully the hallway is empty. It wouldn't do to see a member of High Command behaving in such a way.

What a ridiculous thing to get so worked up over. Being cooped up on this moon was driving her loopy. She'd go see the Quartermaster after the debriefing to have her com-link fixed.

Three days later, Padmé rubs at the headache forming behind her eyes.

"Should I come back at another time?"

The hopeful Ensign Cohen fiddles with his data-pad, and looks so dejected that Padmé gives him a smile she doesn't feel. She stands from the computer terminal, aching from being sat hunched over for so long.

"Quite alright," She murmurs. He smiles back. So young, she notes. Handsome enough, more cute, really. More a boy than man. So young to be on the front line of the Rebellion.

"Is that for me?" She asks when she receives no reply. Cohen snaps himself out of his daze with a nod, holding out the datapad.

"Yes, sorry. The report on the trade line by Mandalore."

“Thank you, Ensign.” Padmé says, moving to sit back down. She opens the report and starts to skim over the content, glancing up to see Cohen still stood hovering nearby. His nervousness is almost palpable, like vapour in the air.

“Was there something else?” She asks, as politely as she can. She doesn’t mean to be rude, but the increase in skirmishes and engagements with Imperial fleets has left Padmé literally up to her ears in reports and proposals.

“Oh, sorry, my Lady.” He mumbles, turning a scarlet red. Padmé feels a flush of guilt, forgetting how intimidating it can be to report to a superior. If possible, he looks even younger before her, trying to keep composed despite a tell-tale twitch of nervousness.

“You’re dismissed, Ensign.” She says as kindly as she can give such an order. “Thank you for bringing me the report.”

With a grateful nod, Cohen turns and leaves her to the small command room on the lower floor.

Her job is a strange one.

Unlike Bail and Mothma, Padmé is not well-known within the Rebellion. In fact, she wasn’t known at all to most. Bail and Mon were careful, never speaking her name unless they were alone. They call her General in the presence of others. Nobody questions it.

She wears her hair shorn to her neck, and forgoes her former finery, swapping them for fatigues that were easy to manage and throw on in a hurry. It was funny how normal she looked without her ornate headpieces and clothes. But it’s necessary — Naboo clothing isn’t exactly known for being inconspicuous.

In briefings she wears a hooded cloak, or even a visor or helmet if they were incognito. Her work consists mostly of administrating funding and occasionally helping with strategy. It keeps her out of the spotlight, which is where she needs to stay.

The general consensus is that she’s a member of the Alderaanian aristocracy — a representative for Bail for when he’s off-world. It’s easier that way.

Part of her truly feels as though she is simply that, a member of High Command who stands behind the other Generals and Commanders, unnoticed and quiet. Surprisingly, Padmé does not feel particularly disconcerted knowing that many believe her to be dead. People being aware of her identity could put many others in danger. Besides, she rather liked the anonymity of it all. It reminded her of hiding amongst her handmaidens, feeling a smug satisfaction at her court’s ignorance to her place within her maids.

Once alone, Padmé hooks the datapad into the computer terminal, rubbing her eyes.

The report is thankfully succinct and concise, laying out the events that led to the loss of two X-wings in what had meant to have only been a reconnaissance mission. She notes Commander Kodah was amongst the flight team. Mon Mothma had told her to keep an eye on the pilot, who seemed to have as much tact as a bantha in an evening gown. He’s effective in ground work — sieges, battles, and could shoot a TIE out of space like it was nobody’s business, — but he’s too hot-headed for the more stealthier missions.

The report is rather unbiased, she notes. When she sees the author, she has to double-check. Kodah admits all his mistakes on paper, far more articulate than he'd ever been in debriefings and meetings. Probably because he was almost always out of breath and mildly concussed from dogfighting.

When they eventually travel to the outpost for the datafiles from the defected scientist, Padmé knows that most of High Command will want Kodah heading up the mission.

She's undecided, but ultimately the majority will have their say. A small corner piece of democracy, still intact.

She writes out a short missive, her own comments on the mission and her recommendations for further causes of action, tutting at the rather ludicrous requests. Unbiased, indeed. Did he think the Rebellion was made of money? She takes back her earlier assessment. Kodah's expectations are bordering on ridiculous. Thank the Force he didn't have access to their credits.

Regarding request to authorise funding of further ion p—

The key jams on the 'r' of her half-formed "proton," and Padmé bites the inside of her cheek in frustration. First her faulty com-link, which had no problems, according to the Quartermaster, and now the terminal. She tries to type for several moments, but the screen just stays frozen.

"Come on," She murmurs to herself, taking a look at the time on the electronic chrono. Twenty-three hundred hours. She can literally feel the bags forming under her eyes. Her bunk is calling to her for some much needed rest.

Suddenly, the screen flickers, before un-sticking. But the myriad of keys that Padmé had pressed don't appear in a jumble of nonsense as she expects. A low buzz sounds, as though the terminal has started to overheat.

further ion pppppp padmé padmé

Padmé stares at the glow of the terminal screen, half-expecting one of the comms staff to come in to reveal some strange elaborate practical joke. But the room is completely silent, save for the whir of the monitor, which spews out more and more letters, moving across the screen like a serpent.

padmé padmé

padmé padmé

padmé padmé

padmé padmé

padmé padmé

padmé padmé

padmé padmé

padmé padmé

She knocks over her chair in her haste to stand. In her chest, her heart is pounding sickeningly against her ribs. All the hairs on her body stand up once more, like lightning is about to strike. Her mouth goes completely dry, and despite her terror, Padmé can't seem to look away. It feels like a tempo increasing, a war drum pounding. In an odd moment of clarity, Padmé knows something awful is happening. The words are like an accusation, racing across the screen, getting faster and faster. The sound of the terminal whirring suddenly sounds like that horrible hissing sound on her com-link.

P A D M E

P A D M E

P A D M E

P A D M E

P A D M E

P A D M E

With a cry, Padmé pulls the cord connecting the terminal to the generator. For several moments, her mouth hangs open in disbelief as the screen remains on, her name filling the screen, quicker and quicker, turning black as her name swarms every line, consuming... before the power blows out and she is left in semi-darkness.

Padmé is not a superstitious woman. She's heard all the ghost tales and legends on the base. None make her lose any sleep at night. But in the dark glow of the empty room, deep underground, Padmé feels a horrible presence, like somebody is standing watching her from a shadowy corner, or is hunkered under the table, ready to grab at her ankles. In her sudden haste to leave, Padmé trips over the chair again, ripping out the datapad, and hurtling out of the door, slamming it shut for good measure.

The hallway is brightly lit and deserted, and already she feels silly for her overreaction, despite her heart still pounding in her chest. With a glance over her shoulder, Padmé tugs her jacket down, smooths her hair, and heads to her bunk as evenly-stepped as she can manage.

She can't shake the sense that something follows her, even though no footsteps sound, and no figures lurk in her peripheral vision.

The next morning, Padmé feels even more ridiculous.

The night before feels like a nightmare that turned out to be a silly dream, just enhanced by the darkness and creepy ambiance of the terminal room. She makes herself return to clear up the mess she made the night before. Her embarrassment solidifies when three technicians are already present, oblivious to her previous outburst. She thanks the stars that this base hasn't been fitted with security droids to record her plight.

The terminal sits there innocuously, already plugged back into the power generator. Her personal datapad is still stacked with several other missives and flimsies. As dignified as Padmé can manage, she takes her things, retreating to her bunk to work alone.

By lunch time, Padmé has completed her communications and reports, and feels cramped up and restless. A walk to the canteen clears her mind of the strange last few days, though by the time she's gotten there she's laden down with a small stack of datapads once more. When she sees several pilots rushing around on their way to the hangar, she recalls the scheduled trade happening with a band of arms dealers. Risky, but they'd been backed into a corner. If the weapons fell into Imperial hands, who knew what waste they would lay to the innocents of the galaxy? At least with the Rebellion, they'd be used against military targets.

"General!"

Padmé turns in the hallway. A tannoy is calling for all pilots to head to hangar B and start pre-flight sequences, and she squints to see who called out for her.

Commander Kodah comes forward, surprisingly in fatigues and not his orange flight gear.

Her surprise must show on her face, because Kodah gives her a big smile, running his hand through a shock of blonde hair.

"Yes, Commander?" Padmé says, reigning in her composure.

"So formal." Kodah laughs. "Call me Zeek."

"Zeek." Padmé amends. In another life, she would laugh along with him, charmed by his dimpled smile and curling hair. But that train of thought, those feelings, only lead to pain.

Plenty of the men on base, even some of the women, try to be friendly. It's a dangerous time, and a lot of people feel lonely. It's only natural that they want to seek solace with those they spend most time with. But Padmé has no interest in going down that particular road.

"What can I help you with?" She asks neutrally.

She sees Kodah's face fall slightly at her coldness, but he shakes it off just as quickly. He produces a datapad from his back pocket.

"My report on the Mandalore skirmish." He says, holding it out to her, bowing with faux formality.

Padmé stares at the little metallic rectangle in the centre of his up-turned palm. Then looks up at his face. When his joking manner falls flat, he straightens. She searches his expression for something condemning, but it's not there. Open, a little confused at her reaction.

"I already received your report," She says slowly, thinking of the night before, the glow of the terminal screen. "I was going to speak to you in person about some of your requests. I... didn't get around to sending you a response."

Kodah lets out a laugh, but it's not unkind. Just unsure, as though he's not certain if she's joking or not.

"I didn't send it to you." He says. He pushes his palm out again. "Maybe you're thinking of another report? The Brosi campaign?"

"Commander, I think I will remember your report on the Brosi Incident for the rest of my life." Padmé replies, feeling slightly strained. "But, you're mistaken. Ensign Cohen brought me your findings last night."

Kodah looks even more confused.

“Who?” He asks. “No, you’re thinking about another report. I literally just finished it this morning. Never mind, just take this. I have watch starting in 10. Comm me any questions.”

Numbly, Padmé accepts the datachip, moving to the side to allow the Commander to sidestep her.

A new wash of soldiers sweep her along with them into the canteen, and she follows them in a daze.

Across the hall, sat at a table, is Ensign Cohen. He’s eating with several other rebels, relaxed and care-free.

A strange feeling descends over her. Something is wrong.

With a shaky hand, Padmé pulls out her datapad. It takes only seconds to pull out the watch shift schedule, and she scrolls through quickly until she finds Cohen, Claud. Somebody goes to walk by her, and without looking up she steps to the side. His data loads onto her pad, and she stares at it uncomprehendingly for several seconds.

Homeworld: Naboo. It all slides into place with a sickening click.

He recognises her from her terms as Queen. He *knows* her, beyond the visor and General — he knows she is Senator Amidala. He knows *Padmé*.

There’s no other explanation, she thinks, turning off her screen and taking a breath. And this is how he wanted to let her know? She could hardly believe it.

He called her my Lady, she remembers with a jolt. Nobody had called her that since her time in office. She hadn’t even noticed at the time, too entrenched in work and an awful headache.

Padmé’s hand closes into a fist around the cold lump of data in her palm. The fear from the night before seeps back in, but converts into anger like voltages running through a conductor. Before she knows it, she’s marching across the mess and stopping just short of his table.

The Ensign looks up at her with the face of a child who’s been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Her anger solidifies, or freezes over, like a lake of ice.

She slams the datachip down onto the surface, and the rest of the table falls silent.

“What is the meaning of this?” Padmé asks. To her surprise, her voice shakes.

Ensign Cohen looks down at her hand, then back up at her in shock.

“I,— uh,” Cohen says hopelessly, flushing a deep crimson.

Part of her wishes he’d throw his head back and laugh. Tell her to take a joke.

Because at least then, she could deem it a *joke*. Not something else. Something unknown. Something insidious.

“Whatever game you’re playing,” She says, when she realises that no coherent answer will be presenting any time soon, “I won’t be a part of it.”

With that, Padmé snatches up the chip, and storms back away. People are staring, but she's too wound up to care.

"Stars, Cohen," She dimly hears somebody say. "What did you *do*?"

The hallway is a blur of people and faces. Distantly, the announcements for launch sequences and a hail for technicians to the hangar are still being called over the speaker system. Padmé dodges a bacta tank being hauled on it's side in a wagon, and then somebody is rolling a barrel full of fuel that almost takes her out.

By the time she gets back to her bunk, Padmé feels calmer, if not rattled.

Cohen had looked so crushed at her reprimand. She really shouldn't have done it so publicly.

What had she even been accusing him of? Padmé runs a hand over her face in the sanctity of a thankfully empty corridor.

Perhaps the Ensign had been attempting to be helpful. But that didn't explain Commander Kodah's confusion on her early access to his report. How could he get access to a report that Kodah hadn't even written until that morning? And the glitch in the terminal... it must have come from the datapad. It also didn't explain the guilt that had splattered across his face when she had confronted him. Some cruel joke, perhaps a rite of passage into the ranks of Cohen's comrades. Maybe it had been linked to her faulty com-link, too. Cohen worked with the comms staff. He'd know how to alter a few lines of code, give her a good scare. Perhaps that was why he'd been so anxious to stick around, gauge her reaction.

It had to be some sort of joke, or a misguided way to try and let her know he recognised her privately, in a report only she would read. Padmé can hear the inconsistencies in her own reasoning, but no other explanation comes to mind, no matter how hard she thinks.

Despite her guilt for losing her control so rapidly, Padmé can't help but feel a slight relief. A rational, if not hurtful explanation had been found. No monsters lurking in the dark, possessing computer softwares or interfering with her com signal.

Somebody had clearly made her the butt of some unheard joke. The datapad had been programmed to output her name, get a reaction out of her. And she supposes that the strange call on her com-link had been a prank of some sort. Maybe some of the pilots were expressing their annoyance with her stance on the outpost attack. It's not that unrealistic that somebody would recognise her at some point. Gossip is one of the ultimate commodities on base; — perhaps the Ensign had let slip who she used to be.

When she goes to sleep that night, Padmé feels another stab of guilt for her loss of temper. She'd apologise to the Ensign the next time she saw him, regardless of his intent to scare her.

Earlier she had laughed at her reactions to the terminal and com-link incident. But in the dark quiet of her room, she quickly banishes any thought of it, rolling over with a shiver.

Three days later, Padmé wakes to the sound of sirens. The drill is a familiar one. Except it's not a drill.

The Imperials have found them again.

Before she's aware of anything beyond the blare of alarms, she is out of bed and half dressed.

The evacuation sequence plays in-between the ringing. With practised hands, she gets her things packed into a bag, slings it over her shoulder. Her blaster fits into the palm of her hand, weighted and familiar.

"There's a dogfight happening in orbit." She hears when she enters the hall. "No Star Destroyer in sight, though. We'll be gone before they get here."

All around her, crates are lifted, terminals are hoisted and run out into the bays. Anything unmovable is destroyed. Wires are wrapped up and slung over arms, hastily dragged away.

The flow of people takes her with them to the hangars. Pilots are putting on their helmets and climbing up into their X-wings, taking off to join the battle.

Her com-link buzzes, and a hologram of Mon Mothma looks up at her with fear evident in the blue pixels of her face.

"Padmé," She says. "You're safe? You're alright?" Hearing her own name makes her flinch, but its so loud around her that nobody hears.

"Yes," Padmé says, stepping out of the way and leaning in so she can be heard over the chaos around her. "The base is under attack, but we're evacuating."

"Thank the Force." Mon says in relief. "Listen, please, whatever you do—"

Interference rumbles on both ends, and Padmé hears the unmistakable whine of TIE fighter engines.

"Mon?" She asks, trying to step away, but there's nowhere to go. The hangar quickly becomes packed as everybody hurries to board the cruiser.

"— panic. I have to talk to you when I see you." Somebody shoves into Padmé as they run by, and she misses a chunk of the communication with a pained wince.

"—All be alright. I have to go. Be safe."

"Wait," Padmé says, but the line goes dead. With a grunt of frustration, Padmé follows the crowd and boards the cruiser, taking a glance up at the sky above. TIE fighters attempt to bombard the X-wings, which dodge and evade, constantly changing attack formations to shake up the enemy.

Without meaning to, Padmé looks for a TIE advance amongst the battle. Vader's ship, his own heavily modified fighter. She's only seen it in holos, heard the hushed descriptions from the scouts who lived to tell the tale. A wash of revulsion makes her sit back in her seat. If Vader were there, no rebel would be escaping his wrath. From the footage she's seen, she knows that he could take out entire squadrons. Entire fleets.

Whilst the Imperials are distracted, the cruiser takes a jump to hyperspace.

She thinks about Mon's strange warning. Not to panic? She hadn't been able to hear.

A strange sense of foreboding comes over her, a feeling of danger. Padmé feels unsettled, more so than in a long time.

When they arrive on their new base, further away, and even more hostile and humid than the last, Padmé busies herself by helping set up the command centre. An intense meeting regarding the attack leaves everybody shaken and exhausted.

Three years of fighting and running have never felt so long. And when Padmé goes to bed that night, in the new bunk that is still as uncomfortable and small as the last one, she allows herself to admit just how lonely she truly is.

She must be truly tired to admit such a feeling.

Her thoughts of Vader remain untouched, tucked away in shame. Even now, she does not entertain the ghosts of her past. Padmé knows that it would undo her.

It's a rarity that Padmé is allowed to leave the base, so when the opportunity comes, she takes it with both hands.

Some of the soldiers dislike her coming along, but the pilots have a grudging respect. They know she can handle herself from the few missions she'd been on. It's strange, almost surreal, to wonder what they would do if they knew who she really was. Padmé doesn't entertain the idea of how many would turn her over for a few credits, but Bail and Mon are the only two who know just how eager Vader would be to get his hands on her. It comes in handy that the Imperials have destroyed most images of her, along with the former Republic senators, replaced with puppets and Grand Moff's. Many of the lower members of the Rebellion don't know her by a name at all, not even a rank to call her; upon capture, if they break in interrogation, they have nothing incriminating to give.

Still, it pays to be cautious. Although her clothing is far more inconspicuous these days, her hair cropped close to her neck, she decides to wear a helmet and heavy coat to avoid recognition. It gives her a chance to let emotion run across her face, dropping the stoic mask and allowing the pure exhaustion to come to the surface.

Her thoughts stray to the glow of her terminal, spewing out her name like a stream of accusation. Somebody on the base knows who she is. And they wanted her to know that they knew.

In all honesty, Padmé is not making the best decision when she opts to come on a mission. They're going to speak with the defected science officer on the rendezvous point on an archaic research station on the outskirts of wild space. But Mon has yet to return her coms after leaving such an ominous message, and there's nobody there to tell her not to. So she boards the shuttle under the guise of a freighter delivering to a mining outpost, and tries her best to do as Mon told her. *Don't panic.*

She feels the two technicians give her a wide berth on the ride through hyperspace.

Usually, members of high command stayed on base, not bothering with reconnaissance. Especially when the mission is checking out a potential defector. But Padmé feels the need to

get up in space, get out of her mind for a while. There's been barely a second to breathe since they had to clear the moon from the Imperial attack. She still hasn't had the chance to apologise for her erratic outburst at Ensign Cohen. To think of the way she had flown off of the handle in such a manner, in front of so many people... It's unlike her to do so. His little practical joke with her screen had gotten to her far more than it should have. Stars, she hadn't been that shaken when attempts had been made on her life. She'd given it some thought since it had happened, and feels a roil of embarrassment at her overreaction. By going out on this mission, Padmé hopes she'll reboot like a droid in need of a maintenance check. Make sure she hasn't lost her touch.

They dock on the station, which looks rather dilapidated and deserted. Padmé follows the pilot, technicians, and the Torgruta who will serve as interrogator. As they disembark, Padmé recalls one of their best pilot's behaviour after undergoing an Imperial interrogation. He'd returned to base after escaping a detention centre, reported that he wanted to lay down before being debriefed, and shot himself in his bunk. She is thankful a hundred times over that some mercy, some kindness lives on in the Rebellion. Their technique of information retrieval can't be more different. Tales of officers torturing their own insubordinates to enforce loyalty from their other staff are common within the Empire's ranks.

The defected officer is waiting for them by an abandoned hangar bay. He's a tall man with dark skin and eyes that shift quickly left to right as he waits for them nervously. The shuttle had scanned for life forms and weapons readings before engaging the station, and found it to be empty, save for one. Still, they're all armed as they approach.

"Jeb?" The Torgruta calls.

"Yes," Jeb replies. His voice is too loud in the silence of the outpost, high and anxious. "Thank you for coming."

Padmé sits with the technicians as they fact-check every word Jeb says from the next room over. She watches the blue holo of the officer as he talks, thankful to see that his nervousness has seeped away as he seems to realise that for now, he is safe.

"You want a drink, Jeb?" The Torgruta asks, who Padmé remembers is called Rutee. She watches him thankfully drink from a bulb of water that all rebel kits carry.

"Thank you." He says after a moment. He takes a deep breath, leaning back in his chair. "I feel like I've barely eaten or slept since I left the *Devastator*."

The technicians by Padmé freeze up, and by the silence over the holo, Rutee must do the same.

"The *Devastator*?" Rutee asks, her hospitable voice sounding slightly strained. "You never said you came from there."

"I only was there for a few weeks." Jeb says uncertainly, as though unsure whether to continue speaking or keep silent. "I was part of a research team, scouting Jedha. The *Devastator* picked us up, and whilst we were docked I escaped from a spaceport. I doubt anybody will have noticed I've gone."

"Jedha?" Rutee says, momentarily sidetracked. The technical officers by Padmé hurry to type on their screens. "What do the Imperials want with Jedha?"

Jeb shrugs earnestly. “We were looking at the land’s resistance to a potential mine. That’s all we were told.”

“Alright.” Rutee says, seemingly regaining her composure. “We can get you some food, if you’re hungry. The technicians will verify your information.”

Jeb nods, idly playing with the empty water bulb in front of him.

“I saw Lord Vader, on the bridge, once.” He admits in a whisper. “I was so scared to leave when I did. I never really believed in the force until I went on that flag-ship. You can feel it... it’s hard to describe. Like in the air, all cold and horrible.” He shudders, and Padmé can’t tear her eyes away, her palm resting over her chin and mouth.

The technicians have paused, listening to Jeb’s recount, and Padmé regrets her decision to come on the mission. For the rest of the debrief, she schools herself into feigned nonchalance, but inside that same feeling has come back. The silence of the deserted research station is horrendous against her ears, which prick at every sound, almost flinching with each keystroke and inhale around her.

In the shuttle on the way home, Padmé watches the blur of stars rush by. They usually don’t make calls when they’re in transit; the signal is too risky, but she wishes desperately to call Mon, find out the reasoning behind her cryptic warning. Or to hear from Obi-Wan, whom she hasn’t spoken to since the fires of Mustafar. Force, she’s never felt more alone in a shuttle full of people. She hugs her helmet to her chest. The plexiglass of the window is cool on her face as she leans against it.

Her years of training keep her stoic and unruffled as they travel back to base, but Padmé cannot help the tears that gather behind closed eyelids.

It turns out that Mon is unavailable for several days following the attack, and unable to finish their conversation. Bail is also unavailable, stuck in the Imperial Centre for a deliberation in the Senate. Padmé tries her best to step up in their absence, but her leadership skills have rusted over the years, and she feels more run down than ever.

The week goes by with the usual mania of rebuilding the foundations of a new base.

Padmé finds herself going toe to toe with Commander Kodah in several spectacular arguments, in which both their respective ranks are thrown to the wind, and no prisoners are taken. Kodah believes that they have all the ammunition they need to stage a direct attack on an Imperial outpost, still after the data chip Jeb had told them about. Padmé reminds him that several pilots lost their lives to half a squadron of TIE’s. If they can barely hold their own against such measly numbers, what did he expect from an entire garrison?

“That’s bantha shit and you know it,” Kodah says through her com. He’s on a scouting trip for supplies on the nearby asteroid belt, but somehow he cannot help himself from picking a fight with her, even from the next system over. Apparently he’s willing to risk sending out a signal that could be potentially picked up, just so that he can plead his case for the hundredth time. Padmé would admire his passion, if it didn’t remind her of another strong-headed individual.

“Kodah, I’m not in command,” Padmé says for what feels like the hundredth time. “I couldn’t authorise your plan, even if I wanted to. You have to wait for Mothma to come back, and that’s final.”

A snort sounds from the end of the com, and Padmé rolls her eyes. “You’re part of High Command. Same thing. Mothma put you in charge while she’s away. You just don’t want me to go.”

“I’m not denying that.” Padmé says, side-stepping a crate of bacta patches that are on the way to the infirmary. For once, the base is quiet around her, most soldiers sleeping in the barracks. “But I don’t want another squadron wiped out for no reason. If we start depending on brute power, we’re just as bad as the Empire.”

“Well, when you come up with a *diplomatic* solution for stealing Imperial property from an Imperial outpost, I’ll be all ears.” Kodah replies.

“The sooner you learn that you can’t solve every problem by blowing something up, the better off this Alliance will be.” Padmé says as evenly as she can manage. Despite Kodah’s infuriating capability to get under her skin, his capacity is lessened severely without his physical presence.

“We’re talking about this when I get back.” Kodah says severely.

“Looking forward to it.” Padmé replies, not bothering to wait for a response before hanging up.

Padmé takes a deep breath in the quietness of the hall. It’s a far bigger base than before, and as such they aren’t all stepping over each other in every corridor or walk-way. It’s the dead of night, and most are sleeping or on Kodah’s supply run.

The night is warm as she navigates back to her bunk. She finds that it’s hard to sit still when arguing with Kodah, and had found herself halfway across the base by the time their conversation was over.

The arguments are oddly invigorating. They take her back to her furious verbal battles in the Senate, and she finally can put her diplomatic skills back to work after years of neglect. It’s one thing to politely back Mon Mothma as she shepherds the Rebels with the rest of High Command, standing on ceremony and hiding irritation behind formal titles and “*with all due respects*.” Fighting with Kodah is refreshingly uncensored, and despite their disagreements, Padmé feels that Kodah may respect her more as a leader than he had beforehand.

She’s one of the few who doesn’t have to share a bunk on base. The room is silent as she enters.

When the lights come on in her small room, Padmé doesn’t notice anything amiss. She puts down her com link, stretches out a crick in her neck, then freezes.

On the rough blanket of her small bed is a bouquet of Mountain Daisies. The sight of them doesn’t compute for several seconds, and when it does her blood stops running in her veins. Cautiously, with her stomach churning and heart starting to pound, Padmé approaches the bed as though a poisonous creature has curled up there. Her hand reaches out to touch the petals tentatively, as though to check that they are real.

The sight of the daisies is so foreign, so strange. They only grew at home, dying in any other climate. Her parents had thrown petals over her the day she won her election to power. They were a part of her memory, a part of a planet she could never return to. And they shouldn't be here, on her bed.

It feels like a trap door has opened in the pit of her abdomen, and something tells her, like a blaring alarm, that *something is very, very wrong*. The petals are as soft as skin beneath the pads of her fingers. Moving them triggers a heady smell of floral perfume that makes Padmé's head spin.

Padmé turns on her heel, reaching for her blaster from where it sits on the bedside. She backs away from her bed and steps out into the hallway.

She just about jumps out of her skin to find a person waiting for her in the semi-darkness.

"Hello." Ensign Cohen says hollowly. "Do you like your flowers?"

Ensign Cohen looks... *unwell*. His face is pale and a sheen of sweat shimmers beneath the lights. There is a vacant look in his eyes, as though he's not truly awake. Padmé takes a step back, frightened by his stillness. He stands at perfect military rest, but his eyes do not blink as they watch her lifelessly.

"How did you get my access code?" Padmé asks. She steps back and hits her closed door, her mind finally catching on. 'If this is your idea of an apology, you have been severely misled,' she says incredulously. "Please leave, Ensign. Before I say something I may regret."

"I used to watch you on the holos." He says, almost dreamily. "You were so beautiful..."

"Ensign, I need you to leave. This is inappropriate."

"I can't do that." Cohen says. "You must come with me to the hangar."

"What?" Padmé asks, before she can help herself. "This is insubordination. Leave or I'll make you leave."

"Padmé..." The Ensign says warningly, his voice still empty and flat. "Come with me to the hangar."

Hearing her own name makes her flinch, though she does her best not to show it. Something in his eyes makes Padmé pause. A pleading, almost. She lowers the blaster slightly.

"Are you... alright?" She asks slowly.

"I... no. I can't..." A crease appears in his forehead, before smoothing back out. His next words are almost robotic, like a droid. "Just come with me, please."

Padmé considers screaming to wake the others. She considers attacking him, stunning him. But the look of fear in his eyes makes her consider. What if he's under duress? Maybe he's trying to tell her something.

"Alright." Padmé says softly. "I'll come with you."

She keeps a safe distance from him, half-expecting the man to turn around and attack her. But he continues to walk at an even, measured step, reminding her oddly of C-3PO. Her heart

is truly pounding now, wet and sickly. That primal urge is blaring at her, but she pushes it down. She has her blaster on her if he tries anything funny.

The hangar is dark. She almost falls over a tool box before righting herself. Cohen never stops walking.

“Okay.” Padmé calls, her voice echoing. “I’m here. What do you want?”

“Did I do a good job, sir?” Cohen asks the darkness of the hangar.

The darkness answers.

“A great job. But that will be all now.”

The lights come on, blinding Padmé with their brightness. The voice she hears makes her take several steps backwards, but the dazzling white behind her eyelids causes her to lose her bearings.

“Are you really so surprised?” Vader asks. She sees him before her like a mirage, just as out of place as the daisies, and the ship behind him that is clearly his. The Ensign stands to the side, staring vacantly into space.

She gapes at Vader for several seconds, before attempting to compose herself.

“What have you done to him?” Padmé asks in horror.

Vader merely smiles, but it’s not like before. He looks older, more streamlined and hardened. His smile is cold, humourless. It’s an expression she’s never seen on his face, and her blood goes cold at the sight of it.

“He was very infatuated with you,” He says conversationally, taking a step forward. ‘Sickening, really. Not something a husband wants to hear about his wife.’ He runs a nail over the paintwork of a nearby X-Wing, producing an awful scraping sound. “The things he’d do to you...”

“What have you done?” Padmé demands again. “He’s done nothing wrong.”

“Well, he’s a rebel, so that’s a lie.” Vader says flippantly, almost childishly. When Padmé says nothing, her hand going white around her blaster, he sighs.

“I needed a messenger.” Vader continues. He spares a glance to Cohen, as though he wasn’t worthy of his time. “Didn’t you get my coms?”

She recalls the hissing whisper that had terrified her so badly. The way the hair on her entire body had stood up like a frightened loth-cat.

“It was you.” Padmé whispers. “And the terminal...”

“Was it too dramatic?” Vader asks, like a child caught with a handful of sweets. “I just wanted to talk to you, hear your voice again.”

“Anakin,” Padmé says slowly. The distinct sensation of her stomach falling to her feet makes her voice tremble slightly. His eyes shine at the sound in clear enjoyment. His chastised expression slides off of his face like a mask. “Please leave. Nobody has to get hurt.”

Vader laughs that humourless laugh again. Nonchalantly, as though he were switching on a light, he flicks his wrist. The dry snap of Cohen's neck breaking echoes across the hangar. Padmé's hands fly to her mouth in shock, and she gasps down a horrified choke.

He drops, dead before he even hits the floor. The sound of his skull smacking against the floor echoes in a sickening crack.

"Padmé," He replies mockingly. His hand lays on the gleam of his lightsaber hilt. "I will lay waste to this entire base. I will *eviscerate* every last rebel in this system if I want. But I have decided to be incredibly generous."

The sound of his boots ricochet off the silence of the hangar around them. Distantly, she can hear the hum of the machinery at rest, the insects outside. But it's all muted, as though pulled into a vacuum. She pulls her eyes away from Cohen, trying to breathe again.

He comes to a stop, hands behind his back.

"Come away with me," Vader says. "And I will not raze this base to ashes."

Padmé recalls Anakin once commenting that he heard her heart skip from metres away. Something to do with the force, she assumes. She prays that his conversion to the Sith has eradicated that particular talent. The reluctance isn't hard to feign as she nods slowly, casting a look over her shoulder.

"Alright, alright... Just let me pack my things," She murmurs, then draws her blaster, already pressing the trigger.

Her aim is accurate, even after all these years of inaction, but her attempt is fruitless.

Funny, she had known that she wouldn't hit him before she'd even moved to shoot.

His lightsaber deflects the bolts like swatting an insect, and in a second the red blade is hissing back into its hilt, neatly hung at his belt. Simultaneously, her blaster is ripped from her hands, sailing over and over in the air and into an outstretched palm.

Vader looks down at her blaster for a moment. When his eyes flit back up to meet hers, he merely tuts, as though she was a petulant child.

"Come now," He chides. "Don't be difficult. I am a fountain of patience. I've allowed you to catch my science officer, allowed you to escape my TIE squadron unscathed..." Vader beckons her with his gloved hand. "Come along."

"Unscathed?" Padmé says, unable to help herself. "You killed half of our pilots!"

Vader levels her with a look of apathetic exasperation.

"I think we both know that a couple of your X-wing commanders are at the bottom of a very long list," Vader says. "And if you don't comply, planets are going to be destroyed, systems decimated. If you want to save your little Rebellion, you would be wise to do as I say."

Padmé looks at Cohen's broken body on the hangar bay floor. She crosses her arms over her chest, and tries not to give in to the urge to burst into tears. But all she can think of is a little boy, watching her coronation on the holonet. Now he's dead at her feet.

“You didn’t have to do that,” She says, cursing herself as her voice really begins to tremble. Vader’s face softens a bit, eyebrows pulling together at her visible upset. “You didn’t have to do any of this.”

Vader tilts his head, but his amusement has faded away. His concern is worse, a thousand times so, because Padmé can see her Anakin in the expression, and it’s enough to urge the unshed tears down her cheeks.

“I didn’t do it to antagonise you,” Vader says, and his voice loses the hard edge and becomes almost tentative, like he’s talking to a frightened animal. “Not really. It’s like a courtship, see? I’ve been giving you gifts all along.”

“Anakin...” Padmé says. She takes a step back, and immediately he becomes guarded again. “Please just let me go.”

“I tried to be nice, Padmé.” He replies. “*I am being nice*. Come, don’t make me force you.”

Go on and force me, she wants to say. She wants to make him drag her, kicking and screaming. Prove to him that she feels no love for this person he has become. That he is not the man that she married.

But that’s her ego talking. It would be incredibly selfish of her to defy Vader. She knows with an absolute certainty that his threats are far from empty. There would be no way to sound an alarm, to rouse the base into a fight that they could never win. He’s given her an ultimatum he knows she can’t refuse.

She looks once more to the boy laying on the floor. Padmé can prevent more death, more pointless loss. She’s never been able to truly work in the Rebellion. All of the secrecy and hiding had impeded her. Maybe, by Vader’s side, Padmé can actually do some good for the galaxy.

“You promise not to hurt anybody else?” She asks after a few moments of tense silence.

He nods, quickly, eagerly. The boyish gesture hurts like a thousand pinpricks. “I promise.”

And then she’s walking over, but it feels like walking in a dream. Vader comes forward to meet her, — throwing her blaster carelessly to the ground — and suddenly she’s wrapped up in his arms.

Padmé had expected him to feel cold. Silly, really, for he’s still flesh and blood, and he’d always run very warm. That heat, warming her through her clothes, is so horribly familiar that she bites down hard on her tongue and shudders. His hands go to the back of her neck, and unwillingly she remembers that phantom grip around her throat, the burning taste of ash as she struggled for breath. A sob forces its way out, and Vader pats the back of her hair like it’s the finest satin or silk.

“It’s alright now.” He murmurs, his mouth moving against her neck. He kisses there, once and chaste, and Padmé bites down ever harder because it’s been years since she’s felt this kind of contact from anybody. For just a moment she pretends that the man holding her isn’t dead. Isn’t inhabited by this parasite, that does not truly love her, but merely wants to possess her.

“You needn’t pack anything,” Vader says. “I have things waiting for you, everything you could ask for.”

Padmé says nothing, but brings herself to nod once.

Vader pulls back, but keeps one hand around the back of her neck. She’s not sure if she imagines the single warning squeeze, before she’s guided over to his awaiting shuttle.

“I’ve missed you terribly.” He says, turning to her and smiling.

It’s like looking at a person wearing a mask, Padmé thinks numbly. His face is the same, if slightly older and thinner. His hair, his clothes. But the imposter stares at her from behind it all, eyes gold and almost pulsating. He had always been jealous, but the gleam in his eyes is more than that.

Perhaps this has been who Anakin is all along. Maybe she had never truly known him until now.

She takes one last look at the bay around her. They’d find Cohen, and realise her bunk is empty, but wouldn’t be able to work out what had really happened. Only Bail and Mon would have some clue, but both were off-base, and would arrive far too late to intervene.

Padmé hopes they are smart enough not to attempt a rescue mission. It would only result in a bloodbath.

His gloved hand stretches out and she takes it.

The parasite wearing her husband’s skin pulls her up the ramp. She doesn’t resist.